

Russia as a “Trauma”

The Rise and Fall of Japan as a Great Power

Yaroslav A. Shulatov

Abstract

The present paper discusses the so-called “Russian factor” in the political development of Japan over a period from the late 19th century till the present day. The rise and fall of Japan as a “great power” in the 20th century is tightly linked with its relations with Russia (the Russian Empire and the USSR), which became a specific factor of the Japanese imperial project. Russia served as a challenge to Japan that triggered its social mobilization and militarization in 1895-1905. The victorious Russo-Japanese War made Japan a “great power” with colonies on the continent. However, it also predetermined the political rise of its military circles, which ultimately worked as a time bomb breaking the foundation of the newborn empire. Cooperation with Russia after 1906 was the most effective instrument for Japan’s further expansion on the continent, while the intervention into Siberia after 1917 came as the first alarm signaling the limits of that expansion. The paper also examines the harsh geopolitical rivalry between the two countries during the 1930s, “strange neutrality” during WWII, and the Soviet-Japanese war in August 1945 as the final factor that brought Japan to a surrender and drove the final nail in the coffin of its imperial project. The study shows an unprecedented transformation of Russia’s image in Japan

Yaroslav A. Shulatov, PhD in History, PhD in Law
Kobe University, Japan.
Graduate School of Intercultural Studies,
Associate Professor

ResearcherID: T-7270-2017
ORCID: 0000-0001-9711-8993.
Scopus AuthorID: 57200138622

E-mail: slavutich@hotmail.com
Address: 1-2-1 Tsurukabuto, Nada-ku, Kobe 657-8501, Japan

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over the years and analyzes the Russo-Japanese territorial dispute in a new perspective.

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Russian-Japanese relations often made the headlines over the last two years, with the territorial dispute and peace treaty invariably being the focal points of reports and commentaries. These two issues, glued tightly together by more than half a century of disputes, are seen by many as synonymous to Russia-Japan bilateral relations. This attitude is particularly characteristic of Japan, where virtually any piece of news about negotiations with Russia opens with the mantra that the newly appointed prime minister pledges to settle the issue of “northern territories” and conclude a peace treaty.

However, the disputed islands are only the visible part of the pile of toxic problems that spoil relations with Russia, whose image remains unfavorable in the eyes of most Japanese. According to the October 2018 poll conducted by the Cabinet of Ministers’ Office, a mere 17.7% of the Japanese are well-disposed towards Russia, while 78.8% have no friendly feelings. It is one of the most disappointing indicators that is even worse than the level of friendliness/unfriendliness displayed by Japanese respondents towards China (20.8% vs 76.4%) and South Korea (39.4% vs 58.0%)—countries involved in unremitting disputes with Japan over territories and interpretations of history (The Cabinet Office, 2018). In the meantime, similar polls in Russia draw the opposite picture. According to a Levada Center survey conducted in November 2018, 61% of Russians have a friendly attitude to Japan, and only 20% feel unfriendly. This state of affairs has remained practically unchanged over the last 30 years, with actual figures showing only minor fluctuations (Levada, 2018).

Such a stark contrast in the attitude to each other has far deeper roots than the territorial dispute that emerged after World War II. To understand the reasons behind the current state of affairs and ways to

remedy the situation one should forget for a moment about the motley flow of online news and look at Russia-Japan relations through the lens of history. The more so since the year 2018 was rich in dates significant for the countries' common history.

One century ago, in 1918, the Japanese troops landed in Vladivostok and began an intervention into Russia ravaged by a civil war. Ten years before that, in 1908, the Russian diplomatic mission in Tokyo was elevated to the status of embassy. Eighty years ago, in 1938, the Battle of Lake Khasan (also known as the Changkufeng Incident) took place. Ten years after that, in 1948, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East ended, drawing a line under a project called "the Empire of Japan."

The political history of the Japanese imperial project also marked an important anniversary. A century and a half ago, in 1868, the Meiji era began. Japan embarked on the path of modernization, one of its goals being accession to the club of "great powers." The Land of the Rising Sun was the first among Asian states to cope with this task. This happened to the surprise of many, primarily European powers, which constituted a cohort of world order architects.

However, the most important factor is that Japan's almost entire life as a "great power," from the moment it began to assert itself in this capacity in the early 20th century to the very end, that is, defeat in World War II, is inextricably linked with its relations with Russia—Imperial and Soviet. ***Russia served as a peculiar yardstick to measure the success and failure of the Japanese imperial project.*** Amazingly, it turned out to be one of the most important factors for both the rise and fall of the Japanese Empire.

The collapse of the latter led to traumatic feelings in Japanese society, including those associated with Russia (the USSR). Also, the unprecedented pendulum-like swings in relations up until 1945 partly explain why Japanese society reacted to this experience so painfully and why it is still unable to overcome it. Focusing on the territorial issue is not enough to heal the trauma and restart Russia-Japan relations. In order to develop bilateral contacts in the future, a range of measures are needed that would help understand the complicated picture of the past. But first, let us look at the hard facts.

JAPAN'S WESTERNIZATION: A CHANGE IN THE FOREIGN POLICY PARADIGM

It is common knowledge that from the 17th century to the middle of the 19th century Japan pursued a policy of isolation, refraining from territorial expansion. The greatest minds of that time believed that the respectability of their country did not correlate with the vastness of its territory (Meshcheryakov, 2016). However, with the beginning of the Meiji era, Japan started to implement the Western concept of expanding the imperial space. The country's new political elite set about building an empire, with its own colonies and dependent territories. Expansion was seen as an integral part and an attribute of the coveted status of “great power.” It was this motivation, along with the fear of the superiority of Europeans in the military and technological fields, that became one of the leading driving forces of Japan's accelerated modernization in the Meiji era. Japan's fear of being colonized by the West was overcome by the desire to possess colonies.

In this regard, the creation of robust armed forces became one of the most important components of Japan's transformation, which was reflected in the motto “Enrich the country, strengthen the armed forces!” (*fukoku kyōhei*). Other catch phrases used to characterize relations with the West are: “Japanese spirit, Western technologies” (*wakon yōsai*) and “Leave Asia, enter Europe” (*datsua nyūō*). The latter motto is believed to be co-authored by outstanding scholar Fukuzawa Yukichi. One more cute formula to describe Japan's stance in relations with the West starting from the middle of the 19th century is “the principle of two *hai*”, two hieroglyphic homophones: 拜 (worship) and 排 (removal, elimination), which are both transcribed and pronounced as [*hai*]. With due respect for the scientific, technical and other achievements of the European civilization, Japan sought to adopt them and, while not expelling Europeans from Asia, make them concede some space. Japan's neighbors Korea and China, which proved unable to catch the wave of modernization, were doomed to fall into the tenacious arms of the new Asian empire, determined to take its place in the club of “great powers.” It is no wonder that while proceeding along this path, a young and ambitious Japan was doomed

to confront Western competitors. The logic of expansionism made confrontation with the West inevitable. *However, why was Russia destined to become a particularly important factor for the Japanese imperial project?*

RUSSIA AND JAPAN: THE BEGINNING OF GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY

At the end of the 19th century Russia's and Japan's perception of each other differed significantly. Although the history of Russian-Japanese contacts had seen instances of positive interaction, in general, "threat" was the central component of Japan's perception of Russia. Beginning from the second half of the 18th century Japanese ruling circles and intellectuals regularly stated that Russia might pose risks. At the beginning of the 19th century, after the raids of the Russian sailboats the *Juno* and the *Avos* on Japanese villages in the south of Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands, Russia's image as a menace became deeply ingrained in the minds of the Japanese elite.

In the meantime, Japan's image in Russia was diametrically opposite. Some Russians who had chanced to contact Japan believed that it could become a leading actor in the Far East, and the Japanese might "turn dangerous for Europeans." For one, naval officer and explorer V. Golovnin, who was in Japanese captivity in 1811-1813, wrote: "If a sovereign similar to our Peter the Great reigns over this numerous, smart, subtle, resourceful, patient, hardworking and capable nation, then with the benefits and treasures that Japan has in its bowels, in a few years he will bring it to a position to rule over the entire eastern ocean. And what would happen then to the coastal regions in eastern Asia and western America, remote from the countries that should protect them?" (Golovnin, 1816, p. 27-28). However, the Russian political and military leadership for a long time remained reluctant to consider Japan a source of danger. Even in the early 1890s St. Petersburg saw no reason for rivalry. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in its instructions of 1892 to the newly appointed Russian envoy to Tokyo, M. Khitrovo, postulated that "there exists no fundamental contradiction of interests" between Russia and Japan (Myasnikov, 1997, p. 332). In other words, the countries looked at each other very differently: while threat was an

integral part of Japan’s traditional perception of its northern neighbor, Russia looked at Japan with curiosity, not fear.

This is precisely why the results of Japan’s victorious war with China in 1894-1895 came as an extremely unpleasant surprise for the Russian Empire, which suddenly discovered an ambitious young power near the borders of its newly acquired possessions in the Far East, ready to use force to assert its interests on the mainland. Japan’s victory shocked many, but St. Petersburg took the emergence of a new player and a change in the balance of power in the region more seriously than anybody else. After the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which put an end to the Sino-Japanese War, Russia, with support from France and Germany, forced the Japanese government to return to China the Liaodong Peninsula in exchange for an extra indemnity. Those events, known as the Triple Intervention (*sangoku kanshō*), shocked and outraged Japanese society which felt injured and humiliated. Russia appeared as a symbol of injustice and hypocrisy of the West, which felt free to use force to dictate its rules across Asia but refused to recognize Japan’s right to do the same. The situation turned from bad to worse in 1898 when St. Petersburg obtained the right to lease the Kwantung region from Beijing and set about arranging a new naval base in Port Arthur (today’s Lushun), which had been stormed and seized by the Japanese troops four years before that.

The significance of those events is hard to overestimate. ***The image of Russia as the main threat to Japan took firm root.*** This viewpoint was shared not only by Japan’s military or political circles, but also by the public at large. The slogan “*gashin shōtan*” came into wide use. It meant the need to endure hardships and deprivation (literally “sleeping on brushwood and tasting gall”) to solve a problem, take revenge, etc. In this context, the pathos of the motto was directed against Russia, which, from Japan’s point of view, first forced it to abandon a “legitimate” trophy, and then misappropriated it. St. Petersburg not only became an embodiment of the West’s injustice, but also clearly demonstrated that Japan would have no chances of successful modernization and admission into the club of great powers without beefing up military muscle. One of the most influential journalists and social critics,

Tokutomi Soho, recalled that the Triple Intervention turned him into “a different person” and made him certain that without power “justice is not worth half a coin.” He slammed the impotence of his government as a “shame” that “must be washed away” (Tokutomi, 1935, pp. 310, 313). The desire to respond to the challenge thrown down by Russia served as the trigger of Japanese society’s consolidation in the face of an external threat and spurred its militarization. The country got down to the rearmament of its ground and naval forces and began sincere preparations for a clash with Russia, which already looked inevitable to many. The challenge was accepted.

It is noteworthy that in modern Japan the interpretation of the Russo-Japanese War as a righteous fight for freedom (one’s own and that of the Asian neighbors) is quite common. Within the framework of this discourse, the focus is primarily placed on the risks of losing independence, which was quite realistic in the event of defeat, but the colonial nature of rivalry and immediate causes of the war often fade into the background. One of those who advocated the idea that Japan had fought a forced and defensive war was Japan’s most loved writer Shiba Ryotaro, the author of many historical novels, including those about the Russo-Japanese War—in particular, the bestseller *Saka no Ue no Kumo* (Clouds Above the Hill), first released in 1969-1972 and filmed in 2009-2011 by the NHK broadcasting company. Although some Japanese historians are critical of such views (Wada, 2009-2010), literary fiction largely shapes attitudes and opinions for molding people’s identity and public perception of the historical narrative. Shiba Ryotaro played an important role in forming Japan’s identity after World War II in terms of interpreting the country’s historical past, especially where it concerned the perception of Russia (Bukh, 2010).

RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR: THE BIRTH OF A NEW POWER

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 was a logical continuation of the struggle by a newly established Asian empire for the status of “great power” and new territories, primarily Korea. From this point of view, the war was inevitable. Japan approached it quite systematically, mobilizing all of its resources to the maximum extent. The country

had a clear enemy, clear war objectives and the highest degree of social motivation, which was a stark contrast to Russia.

Tokyo watched with extreme suspicion Russia's growing influence on the Korean Peninsula, which, as strategists and journalists noted, was like a dagger at the throat (or side) of Japan; the peninsula was considered a zone of vital interests (Iriye, 1989, p. 763-764; Ito, Tobe and Sakon, 2011; etc.). Such fears grew especially strong after the Boxer Rebellion in China and the Russian army's occupation of a significant part of Manchuria in 1900, which provided access to the Korean border. In the context of growing tensions in Russia-Japan relations, the Japanese elite got noticeably nervous over the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, especially the part that crossed the Manchurian territory and was called the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER).

Japanese diplomats became extremely active in the international scene. The tactic they employed was quite sophisticated. From that moment on Japan would position itself as a civilized nation that had established constitutional rule and carried out progressive reforms based on the Western model and thereby presented itself as a newly emerging part of the West that shared its interests and was ready to defend them from "barbaric" Russia, an autocratic monarchy violating the "free hands" principle in Manchuria. Such rebranding successfully reformatted part of the international public opinion, primarily in Britain and the U.S., in Japan's favor. In 1902, Tokyo concluded an alliance with London, a long-standing geopolitical adversary of St. Petersburg. The American establishment and the press also took a pro-Japanese stance.

As is known, the Russo-Japanese War resulted in a disaster for Russia and a triumph for Japan. For the first time since the beginning of large-scale colonization by Europeans of this part of the continent, an Asian country was able to overpower a European nation in a major military conflict. The direct or indirect involvement of the leading powers in that war, as well as its impact on the global balance of power has prompted many modern scholars to describe the Russia-Japan clash as "World War Zero" (Wolff et al, 2005-2006).

Russia's territorial losses, excluding the leased Liaodong Peninsula and the southern branch of the Chinese Eastern Railway, were confined

to the southern half of Sakhalin, which was taken over by Japan. During the peace talks in Portsmouth in the summer of 1905, Russian Plenipotentiary S. Witte invited his Japanese counterpart Komura Jutarō to get back to the Treaty of Saint Petersburg (1875), according to which Russia recognized Japan's rights to the Kuril Islands and in return gained control of Sakhalin. However, the Japanese delegates insisted on border revision. They argued that the state of war had canceled all previous treaties, while the island itself was already under Japan's control at the time of the negotiations. Thus, a precedent was created for changing the Russian-Japanese border by military means. This planted a mine under the settlement of all border issues in the future: starting from 1905 the border between the two countries would be changed only militarily (Shulatov, 2011).

The war influenced power dynamics in Europe and completely reconfigured the geopolitical landscape in the Far East. Russia lost its entire fleet and had to withdraw its troops from Manchuria, thus ceding the status of the leader to Japan. The latter became *the main military-political player in the region* for the next few decades. Japan also acquired the long-sought colonies—Korea and southern Manchuria. Both turned into a springboard for Japan's offensive policies on the continent. The West finally recognized Japan as a great power. The status of foreign missions in Tokyo was upgraded from legations to embassies, and unequal treaties concluded in the middle of the 19th century were soon declared null and void, and gradually replaced by agreements matching the new realities.

The victory in the war with Russia, whose potential by far exceeded that of Japan, symbolized the success of the Meiji reforms and led not only to the strengthening of the strategic position of the Empire and the surge of national pride, but also *enhanced the political role of the military*. Only a general or admiral in active service could become head of the Army or Navy ministries, which gave the top brass enormous leverage in forming the Cabinet and shaping its policies—resignation or refusal to nominate candidates for a ministerial post could actually paralyze the work of the civil government. The growing influence of military circles and their ambitions became one of the main challenges

to the Japanese political system. Eventually they turned into a time bomb under the foundation of the newborn empire.

All this was happening amid factional strife within the military. Starting from the first years of Meiji, the country’s armed forces were divided between two rival clans—Satsuma, which oversaw the Navy, and Choshu, which held all key posts in the Army. After consolidation in the face of common enemy and victory in the Russo-Japanese War, political rivalry between the Army and the Navy went into high gear again. Disagreements in determining the main military threat to the country added to the tensions. Russia continued to be perceived as the main potential enemy of Japan’s Ground Forces; for the Navy, rivalry with the U.S. gradually came to the fore. The divergence of views between the Army and the Navy regarding the main hypothetical enemy remained up until the 1940s and acquired a key role in determining the vector of expansion and foreign policy as a whole. It became an additional risk factor for the emerging “great power.”

RUSSIA AS A KEY PARTNER IN EXPANSION

Japan had to pay dearly for the victory. Its material and human resources were exhausted. Military spending increased manifold while the expectations to obtain indemnities, thereby easing the fiscal burden on society, proved futile. The country’s military and political elite was afraid of Russia’s revenge, however, the grave condition of Japan’s finance and the public debt’s surge over the war years left few chances for maintaining military budget at a high level. Having acquired the desired colonies, the Empire was forced to invest enormous resources in their infrastructure and security. Thus, getting back to the slogan “*fukoku kyōhei*,” Japan could “strengthen the armed forces” and become stronger than any of its neighboring competitors, but it could not “enrich” the country. Up to the middle of the 20th century, the first part of this motto, prosperity, had to be sacrificed for the sake of the second one—military power.

At the same time, as soon as Japan took over southern Manchuria and its strategic railway (the South Manchuria Railway, or Mantetsu), it found itself in a position similar to that Russia occupied in the north of the region, where it controlled the CER. Now it was Tokyo’s turn

to feel the strongest desire to keep other actors outside its zone of influence. First of all, this concerned the United States, which was too late for the partitioning of China and now could not wait to lay hands on Manchuria's yet-to-be tapped resources. That made Washington the most dangerous competitor. Japan's commitment to an active "continental policy," i.e. strengthening its influence in China and going ahead with expansion left no choice—only St. Petersburg, determined to retain its foothold in the region and maintain the postwar status quo, could become an ally in the given circumstances.

The victory over Russia healed Japan's scar of previous humiliation, while the new geopolitical situation opened up new opportunities for yesterday's enemies. From that moment on, Japan would be building up its influence on the continent and *enhancing the new status of a "great power" through partnership with Russia*. The two countries demonstrated an impressive pace of evolution in their relationship in 1907-1916 by signing a series of political agreements. They clinched secret deals to join forces to divide North-East Asia between themselves, as well as to prevent competition by third parties, primarily the United States. The agreements with St. Petersburg proved to be the most effective tool for continuing expansion on the continent. With the deterioration of relations with London and the conclusion of a new version of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1911, the desire of the Japanese ruling elite to achieve a further rapprochement with Russia grew stronger. Tokyo began to realize that Britain was not ready to support Japan in its growing rivalry with the United States. In some areas, Japanese expansionist intentions clashed head-on with the interests of the British Empire. In 1912, during negotiations on the next general political convention, Japanese diplomats, keen to avoid provoking London's anger, asked their Russian partners to conceal from their formal allies, Great Britain and France, the new borders of the divided spheres of influence in China (Sazonov, 1912, pp. 29-31).

At the same time, the military on both sides continued to look at each other with suspicion. In Russia, whose positions in the region had noticeably weakened after the defeat in the war, the growth of Japan's military potential sparked a particularly nervous reaction (Shulatov,

2008, pp. 139-161; 215-238). However, the vector of bilateral contacts seemed to have been determined for many years ahead. Both countries entered World War I to fight against a common enemy—Germany. And in 1916, *a Russo-Japanese military alliance* was concluded. Up to this day it formally remains the highest diplomatic point achieved in relations between Russia and Japan. The ruling circles of both empires then saw no alternative to further mutual partnership. In 1915, Russian Foreign Minister S. Sazonov in a letter to Prime Minister I. Goremykin stressed the idea that “in the coming years, and maybe decades, we will have to seek peace and friendship with our neighbors in the Far East and, of course, first of all, with the strongest of them—Japan” (Sazonov, 1915). Alliance with Russia was consonant with Tokyo’s foreign policy pursuits. However, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia led to the collapse of this structure and shattered hopes for turning Russia-Japan cooperation into a long-term trend. Japan revised its foreign policy strategy, and relations with Russia made yet another U-turn.

RUSSIA AS AN OBJECT FOR EXPANSION

The Bolsheviks published the secret articles of the treaties concluded during the tsarist period and declared all previous agreements void. The newborn Russia-Japan alliance suffered an early death, just like Japan’s traditional rival (“mortal friend”)—the Russian Empire. Tokyo faced the need to reevaluate its strategy on the Eurasian continent, especially towards Russia.

The rapid collapse of governance in Russia, including its Far East, looked very lucrative to the Japanese military and enticed it into taking daring moves. After brief discussions and consultations with its partners in the Entente, Japan decided to fill the vacuum and drastically *expand its sphere of influence at the expense of yesterday’s ally*. Starting from 1918, during the intervention, Tokyo sent more than 70,000 troops to Siberia and the Far East (Hara, 1989; etc.). The Japanese contingent was the largest of all foreign invasion forces and also the last one to leave Russia’s territory, delaying the end of the Civil War until 1922.

Amid internal turmoil in Russia, Japan managed to occupy a vast territory up to Lake Baikal. However, despite the ostensible success

and the enormous costs and heavy casualties, Japan's intervention was of no avail. All attempts to establish a pro-Japanese regime and gain a foothold on Russian soil failed, while suspicion and distrust towards Japan in Russia and in the international arena took still firmer root. In 1925, Japanese troops withdrew from northern Sakhalin—the last part of the invaded Russian territory, already Soviet by that time. Oil and coal concessions on the island were the only tangible gain of the intervention. In the final count, though, they failed to bring the expected benefits.

In fact, the unsuccessful Siberian expedition indicated that the Japanese Empire lacked resources for further expansion. Japan demonstrated superiority of its military machine, as no worthy adversary was anywhere in sight, but proved unable to retain the conquered positions. Japan's military and political elite left unnoticed this first alarm bell signaling the limits of expansion, and no long-term conclusions were made. It is very symbolic that many of the officers who subsequently played an important role in the occupation of Manchuria in 1931, as well as in the war with China and the U.S., had participated in the intervention in Russia.

JAPAN AND THE USSR IN THE 1920-1930S: FROM EASING TENSIONS TO NEW CHALLENGES

After Japan recognized the USSR in 1925, the bilateral relations witnessed what the first Soviet ambassador plenipotentiary in Tokyo, V. Kopp, described as “honeymoon” (Kopp, 1925). People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs G. Chicherin wrote: “After the recognition of our government not a single state has been as friendly in its expressions towards us as the Japanese” (Chicherin, 1925). Japan hoped to agree with the Soviet Union on a wide range of economic and political issues. Some Japanese political groups, unhappy with the outcome of the Washington Conference of 1921-1922 and the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon powers, hoped for cooperation with the Soviet Union along these lines. For some time, Tokyo regarded Moscow as a possible partner in countering Chinese nationalism, although it was anxiously monitoring Soviet assistance to revolutionary movements. In Japan,

there was no risk Communist ideology might become widely spread, although it had a certain impact on the intellectuals. At the same time, the leftist ideology strongly fueled the anti-colonial movement in Asia, thus undermining the foundation of the Japanese Empire. In the end, the attempts to develop a “modus vivendi” in China ended in failure (Shulatov, 2016), and soon the USSR and Japan entered into a new large-scale geopolitical confrontation.

In 1931, Japan occupied Manchuria, soon forming a puppet state of Manchukuo in its territory. Japanese ground forces, euphoric after successes, continued to hack off ever more chunks of Chinese territory. In 1937, after another “incident,” the Sino-Japanese armed clashes escalated into a full-scale war. Meanwhile, after the Kwantung Army had approached the border with the USSR, the Soviet leadership launched a thorough analysis of Japan’s strategic potential, its armed forces, economy, social structure, etc. Large-scale military construction began in the Far East. Within very tight deadlines the Soviet Union built a military-industrial complex and deployed an impressive combined force there (Lozhkina, Shulatov and Cherevko, 2019, p. 218–237).

By the late 1930s, border tensions evolved into a large-scale armed conflict. The Battle of Lake Khasan, which occurred in the summer of 1938, although ending in the victory of the Soviet troops, did not identify a clear winner. Kwantung Army officers sought revenge. In May 1939, hostilities flared up in the area of the Khalkhin Gol River, near a small village of Nomonhan. Very soon they developed into a local war between Soviet and Japanese troops, involving aircraft, artillery and armored forces. The Japanese military had underestimated the potential of the enemy, who managed to covertly build up a mighty strike force and after a swift attack beat the Japanese-Manchurian forces. The defeat shocked the ground force command. A number of influential Army officers would subsequently oppose an attack on the USSR to support the Navy’s proposal for southward expansion. The impact of the Battle of Khalkhin Gol, also known as the Nomonhan Incident, played a certain role (Goldman, 2013).

The defeat at Nomonhan exposed serious problems in the Japanese army. The Soviet command appreciated the training and morale of the

Japanese soldiers who offered fierce resistance, but their equipment, commanders' competence and strategic planning left much to be desired. Bogged down in China, Japan's top brass overlooked *the strengthening of their main adversary—the USSR*. As the Japanese army was forced to pay ever more attention to battles in the south, in Central China, Manchuria turned from a reliable buffer against the Soviet threat into a poorly protected rear area. The Japanese Empire proved unprepared for war with a major rival. Diplomatic setbacks added to the effects of the defeat on the military front. On August 23, 1939, in the midst of the fighting in Mongolia, Molotov and Ribbentrop signed the Soviet-German non-aggression pact in Moscow. This had a stunning effect on Tokyo and triggered the resignation of the Hiranuma Kiichiro Cabinet. Trust towards the foreign policy of the ally (Germany) was noticeably shattered.

However, the real scale and consequences of clashes at Nomonhan/the Khalkhin Gol actually remained unknown to Japanese society. The public escaped the traumatic shock the defeat might have entailed and the unavoidable reflections that might have ensued. The government skillfully controlled the news flow, so that for the Empire's subjects the foreign policy picture remained rose-colored and blurred.

While analyzing Soviet-Japanese relations in the 1930s, it is important to remember that the USSR was not only Japan's adversary in military and strategic terms, but also one of the role models for the further development of its imperial project. After the Great Depression of 1929, which exposed Japan's internal problems as well as its economy's heavy dependence on world markets, the country's ruling elite began to drift towards autarchy, that is, the creation of an isolated economic space in the region under Japan's control, which would include both a raw materials base and a market. The leading powers of the world were busy with preparations for a new global battle. Many were certain that the impending war would be total. Japan was no exception. Building a state capable of defending itself and consolidating society for a future war became a task of national importance. As Wada Haruki noted, the Japanese bureaucrats and economists closely watched the first five-year development plans and the "construction of socialism in one

country.” Two totalitarian antagonistic regimes—Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union—served as examples for building another model of a totalitarian (albeit with some reservations) political regime.

THE EMPIRE’S CROSSROADS AND COLLAPSE: JAPAN AND THE SOVIET UNION IN 1939-1945

After Nomonhan, Japan found itself at a diplomatic crossroads. In 1939-1941 it was forced to drastically revise its foreign policy strategy. The main task was to triumphantly end the prolonged war in China and tighten the imperial grip on the southern seas for building a “sphere of co-prosperity” in “Greater East Asia.” So, it was necessary to ward off potential threats from the north and settle relations with Moscow. At a certain point Tokyo even considered *the possibility of the Soviet Union joining the Tripartite Pact*, signed by Germany and Italy in 1940 and directed against Britain and the U.S., but this idea led nowhere, largely due to Berlin’s stance (Molodyakov, 2004). Nonetheless, in April 1941, Japanese Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke signed the Neutrality Pact in Moscow. It was a clear signal that northward expansion plans had been put on pause in favor of the southern option. Japan’s aim was to plug the channels of foreign aid to the Kuomintang government and ensure control over the raw material resources in the southern seas.

The impact of Khalkhin Gol was invisibly present behind the backs of the Japan’s military planners. The ground forces, which traditionally advocated a “northward push,” i.e. expansion on the continent, and, accordingly, which considered Russia as the main adversary, were forced to tone down their rhetoric in relation to Moscow. In the summer of 1941, after Germany attacked the USSR, influential army officers, including those who had chanced to fight against the Red Army on the Mongolian border, displayed great caution in considering the possibility of starting a war in the north. Despite pressures from Berlin, Tokyo preferred to take a wait-and-see attitude and, while not excluding further participation in the war against the Soviet Union, to make sure where the tide of the Soviet-German confrontation would turn. The idea of a northern campaign was put on hold. Southward

expansion was identified as a higher priority. Japan was getting ready to go to war with Britain and the United States.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and the beginning of the war in the Pacific, a rather unique situation emerged in Soviet-Japanese relations. All of the world's leading powers belonged to one of the warring blocs and were at war with the others. Only the USSR and Japan, while belonging to the opposite camps, were in a state of "*strange neutrality*" (Lensen, 1972).

The attitude of both countries towards the neutrality pact was rather cynical as both considered the possibility of severing it. For obvious reasons, at the initial stage of the war with Germany, the Soviet Union was extremely interested in Japan's neutrality, but after the Battle of Stalingrad, which brought a radical turn in the war, the parties switched places. The attention of many in the Japanese establishment was now focused on relations with Moscow. Japan's Foreign Minister Togo Shigenori believed that "in the current war the diplomatic war is rivalry for the USSR" (Togo, 1967, p. 299). Against the backdrop of a series of defeats in the Pacific theater of operations contacts with Moscow acquired particular importance.

The Soviet Union was Japan's only diplomatic channel inside a hostile coalition and, as influential figures in the Japanese leadership believed, a chance to get out of the war without losing face. These hopes persisted even after the Soviet government declared the denunciation of the neutrality pact with Japan in April 1945. Misguided by Soviet diplomats' vague explanations, Tokyo made the erroneous conclusion that the USSR had no intention to go to war with Japan before April 1946. Unable to realistically assess the situation, up until July 1945 the government sought Moscow's mediation in possible negotiations with the U.S. and Britain. Both Japan's senior military officers and the Emperor himself displayed great interest in this. However, as is known, the political decision that the Soviet Union would declare war on Japan was adopted and formalized by the Allies in the Yalta Agreements back in February 1945. In the evening of August 8, V. Molotov told Japanese Ambassador Sato Naotake that the Soviet Union would be in a state of war with Japan as of August 9. A few hours later, Soviet troops rolled

into Manchuria. An overwhelming superiority in firepower, equipment and manpower, as well as battle experience and a high level of combat training were the key factors that ensured the Soviet whirlwind attack.

Just three days before that, on August 6, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The scale of destruction was unprecedented. Japanese historians are debating today over which factor was decisive for the surrender of Japan—the atomic bombing (Asada, 1998) or the Soviet Union’s entry into the war (Hasegawa, 2005). A number of researchers say the combination of both factors played the decisive role (Wada, 1990), which is difficult to disagree with. The use of a new class of weapons of colossal destructive power was certainly one of the most important reasons that ultimately influenced the decision to accept the terms of the Potsdam Declaration. At the same time, as Hasegawa Tsuyoshi showed in his monograph, *the Soviet offensive finally ruined the hopes of the Japanese elite* to achieve acceptable conditions of peace and to avoid unconditional surrender. From this point of view, the Soviet Union’s entry into the war was formally the bottom line in the process of Japan’s surrender and the finale of the project called “the Japanese Empire.”

AFTER THE WAR: RUSSIA AS A TRAUMA

Thus, *the relations with Russia*—the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union—*were one of the main external factors that constantly influenced Japan* throughout the first half of the 20th century, becoming a tester of its “greatness.” Russian-Japanese contacts were characterized by an exceptionally high pace of changes in the friend-or-foe coordinate system and showed record-breaking frequency of polarity changes in a short period of time, becoming a kind of geopolitical pendulum in Japan’s drive for a “great power” status. Such dynamics is quite unique and unparalleled in Japan’s relations with other countries for the historical period under review.

Obviously, Japan’s relations with Russia over half a century (from 1895 to 1945) reflected the quintessence of its cultural and ideological guidelines and its long-cherished dream—recognized status of a “great power,” a dream that once materialized as victory over the Russian

Empire and was shattered in World War II by the last blow from the Soviet Union. Russia-Japan relations in the first half of the 20th century proved to be closely associated with the rise and fall of the Japanese Empire, and the “Russian factor” was largely decisive in this respect. At the same time, the image of Russia itself has undergone an impressive transformation—from a symbol of humiliation to a symbol of victory, and, eventually, to a symbol of *trauma*—both for the elite and for Japanese society. This traumatic image was destined to be the most stable. Its legacy has survived to this day. This is largely due to the complex nature of the injury, where various scars overlap in one sore spot.

The Soviet Union’s entry into the war with Japan was the decisive factor for the latter’s surrender and the collapse of the imperial project, the end of a “great power dream.” The country’s leadership was fully aware of this, but for most of Japanese people the picture looked different. Up until August 1945, the USSR and Japan had not been at war. The uneasy relations with the Soviet Union prior to this period were not reflected in Japan’s official propaganda, it was targeted primarily at the U.S. In the public mind, the war was with Americans, and not with Russians. In the subsequent years, this opinion transformed into a “thief at a fire” propaganda cliché. According to Kato Kiyofumi, “the peculiarity of the emotional perception of Russians by the Japanese was that it was fundamentally different from the feeling of being losers, which the Japanese had towards Americans” (Kato, 2015, p. 469). In this regard, the bitterness of defeat and the loss of the “great power” status overlapped with the sense of new injustice committed by Russia.

After the end of World War II, the Japanese had to live through endless traumatic experiences. The propaganda machine operated very effectively throughout the war years, so the shock experienced by Japanese society from the defeat was enormous. In addition, several million people who remained in the former colonies and dependent territories found themselves in distress. About 600,000 former soldiers of the Kwantung Army were brought to the Soviet Union as labor force. Almost 10 percent of them died (Katasonova, 2005; etc.). These events, and the repatriation—someone would rightly describe it as

“expulsion”—of the Japanese from the south of Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands, have had a disastrous effect on the image of the Soviet Union in the Japanese public mind. The Cold War secured this trend for decades. Amid ideological confrontation with the Soviet system, the transfer of this traumatic experience from generation to generation went on with the state authorities playing an active role in this process. The negative image resulting from the combination of all these factors became deeply ingrained in the Japanese national consciousness.

TERRITORIAL DISPUTE

The territorial dispute, which for many in Japan with the passage of time became a synonym of Soviet-Japanese, and then Russian-Japanese relations as such, emerged precisely in this traumatic context. This explains the painful perception of any hints and demands by Moscow to link it with the recognition of the results of World War II. Emotionally, it is not easy for Tokyo to do so even now, although revanchists demanding restoration of the prewar state of affairs are very few. The dismaying decline and aging of the population, strong pacifist sentiment, constantly erupting historical disputes with neighbors, unbridled growth of China’s influence against the background of instability in Japanese-American relations after the Trump administration’s rise to power, leave little room for pressing for a revision of World War II results. It is the shadow of China, along with personal motives, according to many, that is found behind Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s vigorous attempts to mend relations with Russia, which in recent years ceased to seem fatally doomed to confrontation.

In November 2018, after a meeting between the Russian president and the Japanese prime minister in Singapore, the parties announced their readiness to speed up peace treaty talks on the basis of the Soviet-Japanese Declaration of 1956 that allows the handover of the Shikotan Island and the Habomai Islands (which are often considered one island) to Japan after the signing of the peace treaty. In fact, this should be regarded as a departure from the decades-old steadfast stance concerning the “four northern islands” that Japan demanded from the Soviet Union and then from Russia, although Japanese

officials are keen to distance themselves from such an interpretation. Nevertheless, according to a December 2018 poll conducted by the NHK broadcasting company, 57% of the Japanese generally welcomed the decision to accelerate the Russian-Japanese peace treaty negotiations on the basis of the 1956 Declaration. The survey stated unequivocally that the Declaration implies “the transfer to [Japan] of two of the four northern islands, Habomai and Shikotan, after the conclusion of a peace treaty” (NHK, 2018).

However, the prospects for resolving the territorial dispute proper remain vague. According to the same NHK poll, 38% of the Japanese insist on a one-time transfer (in Japan they use the term ‘return’) of the four disputed islands, while as many agree to a phased resolution of the problem, i.e. returning Shikotan and Habomai first, and then negotiating Iturup and Kunashir. Only 10% said the Lesser Kuril Chain would be enough (NHK, 2018). Other polls draw a similar picture—about a third of the Japanese are hardliners who insist on the transfer of all four islands, but at the same time one cannot but notice some increase in the number of those who support a compromise. According to the daily *Sankei* and the Fuji News Network (FNN), in January 2019, 32.9% favored the return of all four islands at once (according to the previous survey of December 8-9, 2018, 30.8% said so); the idea of a phased solution (transfer of Shikotan and Habomai + negotiations on Iturup and Kunashir) was the choice of 43.5% (in December 2018, 50.0%); resolution of the territorial dispute based on the transfer of two islands would satisfy 10.1% (in December 2018, 7.7%); while 7.3% agreed to drop the demand for the territories altogether (in December 2018, 5.7%) (Sankei-FNN, 2019). It is likewise noteworthy that those who agree to close the issue of Shikotan and Habomai, or to continue negotiations on Kunashir and Iturup (which is not necessarily tantamount to demands for their transfer) outnumber the hardliners in aggregate. Thus, from the standpoint of domestic policies, there is an obvious trend towards a milder approach, for instance, the “two islands + alpha” formula Wada Haruki proposed back in the late 1980s: the transfer of Shikotan and Habomai, and joint economic activity or other preferences for the Japanese on the other islands (Wada, 1988).

In private conversations, many Japanese experts recognize it is unrealistic to get all four islands, let alone at the same time. The prime minister’s inner circle is aware of this. Explaining this to the public at large, which has been told all along since 1956 that it is essential to secure the return of the “four northern islands” illegally occupied by the Soviet Union, is a daunting task, but nevertheless certain movement in this direction has been observed over the past year. In January 2019, on the eve of a Russian-Japanese summit, NHK newscasters, while emphasizing the toughness of Russia’s position in the territorial dispute, in a somewhat casual way cited a former Habomai resident as saying: “It’ll be good if at least Habomai and Shikotan are back” (NHK, 2019). News agencies repeatedly quoted sources in Abe’s entourage as saying that the prime minister would be hypothetically ready to put an end to the territorial dispute on the basis of this. For example, in November 2018, the daily *Asahi* quoted a source close to Abe as saying: “There are so many residents in Kunashir and Iturup as it is that Russia is unlikely to return [these islands]” (Asahi, 2018).

Confrontational phrases such as “illegal occupation” of the islands by Russia have disappeared from the vocabulary of Japanese officials. This was particularly obvious in the speeches the prime minister and foreign minister made at the National Rally to demand the “return of the northern territories” on February 7, 2019. Abe’s speech was brimming with optimism and determination to devise a “mutually acceptable” option for resolving the territorial dispute and conclude a peace treaty jointly with the Russian president. No verbal attacks against the latter were heard. This was a stark contrast to the years-long tradition and especially to the declared agenda (PM Office, 2019). The prime minister and his associates adhere to such a cautious tone at all official events, including parliamentary hearings, in defiance of criticism they hear from the opposition.

Although the hopes that many, including part of Japan’s political leadership, pinned on a possible breakthrough as a result of negotiations with Putin at the G20 summit in Osaka in June 2019, did not materialize, the rhetoric has not been shifted into reverse so far. It is also important that a majority of Japanese people have no exaggerated

expectations regarding the prospects for a territorial settlement: according to January 2019 polls, only 20.4% hope for progress on this issue, while 72.9% do not share such optimism (Sankei-FNN, 2019). Against this background, even minor gains can be interpreted as success. We will probably see more probes into the country's public opinion regarding the limits of a compromise. For now, the Japanese side prefers to watch and wait.

This is largely because after Japan eased its stance on the issue of the Joint Declaration of 1956, and the ball is actually in Russia's court in the territorial dispute. However, the situation in Russia is even more complicated.

In general, Russians' positive attitude towards Japan coexists with the conviction that the islands cannot be given away by any means. According to the Levada Center, the number of respondents who opposed the islands' transfer never dropped below 71% between August 1992 and November 2018 (Levada, 2018). After the authorities' ratings slumped in connection with the pension reform and as Russian society is getting ever more politicized, the implementation of the Soviet-Japanese Declaration of 1956 entailing the transfer of two islands to Japan can deal another blow to the popularity of the authorities in general and President Vladimir Putin personally. Settling the territorial issue without much ado, the way it happened to the border dispute with China in 2005, will hardly be possible, due to the Russians' awareness of Japan's claims (the irony is that at one point the Japanese government itself did a great deal to raise this awareness as it naively hoped to convince the Russian public that the four islands should be handed over).

Therefore, the Russian leadership prefers to be cautious and refrains from fast-tracking the negotiations. A February 2019 VTsIOM survey of the Kurils' residents quite expectedly showed strong opposition to the transfer of the islands: 96% believe that Russia should not transfer "the southern Kuril Islands" to Japan. The wording of the question did not imply an assessment of different territorial settlement options (VTsIOM, 2019). Obviously, this is intended to be of some help in discussions with the Japanese side. The tactics of juggling words has been employed, too. At some point Putin threw the Japanese side into confusion with a

question about which side would exercise sovereignty over the islands should they be transferred to Japan (Putin, 2018). Such a paradoxical formula keeps the transfer issue in limbo—in this way negotiations can be conducted indefinitely. At the same time, the Russian president is trying to avoid harsh statements, leaving room for maneuver.

The role of the “bad cop” is assigned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose officials regularly make critical statements about the negotiations on the territorial issue. In August 2019, Russian Foreign Minister S. Lavrov recognized Russia’s obligations under the 1956 Declaration, including a possible transfer of Habomai and Shikotan after the conclusion of a peace treaty, but at the same time emphasized the idea that “the stumbling block is the unwillingness of our Japanese counterparts to recognize the results of World War II.” One can also take note of the unceremonious remarks about “Tokyo’s strongest dependence on Washington,” doubts over Japan’s independence in foreign policy and security matters, and annoyance over its decision to join, albeit to a limited extent, the Western sanctions against Russia (Lavrov, 2019). However, it is obvious that the argument regarding the results of World War II takes a crucial place in the Russian Foreign Ministry’s rhetoric. From time to time Lavrov himself urges Japan to recognize Russia’s sovereignty over the Kuril Islands as a precondition for progress in further negotiations.

But for now, there is no chance for Tokyo to go that far. Not because Japan does not recognize the results of World War II—by signing the UN Charter, Japan *de facto* and *de jure* agreed with the post-war world order, and according to Article 6 of the Soviet-Japanese Declaration of 1956, the two countries mutually renounced all claims to each other that arose as a result of the war starting from August 9, 1945. Strictly speaking, the maneuverability of the Japanese government in the legal field is very limited. Under the current conditions, *recognizing publicly and in advance* Russia’s sovereignty over all the Kuril Islands for Japan would be tantamount to losing face. It is possible to resolve the issue only within the framework of *a package deal*, the contours of which are still very blurry. There is a great deal of ambiguity over the security issues that have been Moscow’s traditional priorities, namely, the hypothetical

possibility that a U.S. military infrastructure might be deployed on the islands, should they be transferred to Japan. In a word, the prospects for resolving the territorial dispute are not optimistic at the moment.

As Dmitry Trenin rightly remarks, if a political agreement is reached to resolve the territorial problem, such a solution will require “ratification” by the public opinion of both countries (Trenin, 2019). While there is a noticeable drift towards compromise in Japanese society and politics, and not only on the territorial issue (it should be noted that Tokyo’s participation in the Western sanctions against Russia is rather supine, because many of the blacklisted persons denied entry to the United States and the EU regularly visit Japan) the situation in Russia at the moment is clearly not very favorable for a breakthrough. In a sense, the countries have switched places in contrast to the situation of the first half of the 2000s. When they met in Irkutsk in 2001, President Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro agreed that the 1956 Declaration “constitutes the basic legal document” for resolving the territorial dispute (Putin and Mori, 2001). Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in 2004 repeatedly called for the implementation of the provisions of the 1956 Declaration without any linkage to Japan’s public recognition of the outcome of World War II, using the settlement of the border dispute with China as a template (Golovnin Spor, 2004). At that moment Tokyo found those proposals insufficient, and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi took an extremely tough position on the territorial issue, demanding a simultaneous transfer of all four disputed islands. That chance for a settlement was missed.

One should also note the importance of the personality factor in the Russian-Japanese dialogue. The current policy towards Russia is largely an initiative of Prime Minister Abe, whose term of office ends in 2021. Putin’s tenure of office expires in 2024, and for now there is no reason to make unambiguous conclusions about the transition of power in Russia. However, it is possible that with the appearance of new top officials, the positive potential in Russian-Japanese contacts, which has been accumulated with difficulty in recent years, will be reduced to nothing. Or there will follow a significant step back like the one that occurred during Japan’s period of ministerial leapfrogging

before Abe's eventual reelection 2012, or the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev, who is in the habit of political trolling of the Japanese by making demonstrative trips to the South Kuril Islands. To put it in a nutshell, the issue of settling the territorial dispute or of a future peace treaty, useful to both sides for various reasons, can be postponed indefinitely if not buried altogether.

HEALING THE INJURY

The question of traumatic experience is still there. As is known, time heals, however, with some countries it took too long to heal the scars suffered in relations with neighbors and the change from negative to positive feelings was not an invariable outcome. In Japanese society we see the effect of a non-healing wound. However, certain changes for the better are in sight. According to the data obtained in the Japanese prime minister staff's polls, despite the generally cool mood, 79.8% of the respondents consider the development of relations with Russia important to Japan and the Asia-Pacific Region. It is noteworthy that most often people aged 60 and older stated the absence of friendly feelings towards the northern neighbor more often, while young people aged 18-29, as well as 40-50-year-olds expressed their friendly attitude more frequently than the others (The Cabinet Office, 2018). (According to the Pew Research Center, globally young adults aged 18 to 29 tend to have a more favorable view of Russia than those who are 50 and older, with the biggest difference by age shown in Japan, where there is a 20-percentage gap between the youngest and oldest adults in their attitude towards Russia (Pew Research Center, 2018)). This evokes cautious optimism, although many factors will be required to remedy the situation.

It is important to develop contacts between scholars and continue sober discussion of the history of relations between Russia and Japan, avoiding time-serving comments and letting the opposite side make its point of view known to the public at large. In this respect it is worth noting the intensification of contacts between historians of the two countries and the successful implementation of a number of joint projects, specifically the simultaneous publication in Russian and Japanese of a joint monograph on bilateral relations in the "parallel history" format.

It is necessary to maintain dialogue in the field of security and contacts between the defense ministries of the two countries, while minimizing various incidents in the border zone, at sea and in the air. In case of a favorable development of relations it might be useful to arrange joint exercises and rescue operations at sea, possibly involving third countries, primarily China, although at this point this seems unlikely. Nevertheless, this could both help ease tensions in the region and demonstrate Moscow's equidistance from Beijing and Tokyo.

In addition to the traditionally active cultural exchanges between Russia and Japan, special emphasis should be placed on the expansion of humanitarian contacts and the need to remove the existing hindrances. This concerns, above all, visa regulations. Cancellation of visas is long overdue. The number of Japanese citizens visiting Russia exceeded 100,000 just a couple of years ago. According to the Japan National Tourism Organization, 94,800 Russian citizens visited Japan in 2018, which is 22.7% more than in 2017. As of September 2019, the number of Russians visiting Japan continued to set new records, ranking second in terms of growth rate in the total tourist flow (JNTO, 2018-2019). Prime Minister Abe has repeatedly stated that he sees a common goal in doubling the tourist traffic by 2023, thus bringing the number of tourists to 200,000 on either side (Abe, 2019). The abolition of visas does not just look logical in this regard—this step can invigorate bilateral relations now and in the long run. Wider people-to-people contacts will certainly contribute to building truly good-neighborly relations and creating prerequisites for dialogue on controversial chapters of history.

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